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ABSTRACT

This paper argues for the sustained study of the organizational nature of schools, which should be conducted through a search for good theories. It outlines what such theories would look like and what might reasonably be expected of them. The essay argues that there now is broader recognition of the organizational characteristics and conundrums that distinguish schools and their administration from other contemporary organizations. Schools should be referred to as schools, rather than as members of an ambiguous subset of educational organizations. A review of competing and complementary theories concludes that both scientific explanation and interpretative understanding can and must ultimately inform each other in the search for an interpretative explanation of the organizational nature of schools. (LMI)

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Toward an improved understanding of the organizational nature of schools: Part 2.

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Paper prepared for the AERA Organizational Theory Special Interest Group
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Toward a theory of schools as organizations

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A little over a decade ago I sought to argue the case for more tightly focused study of schools in a paper entitled *Toward an Improved Understanding of the Organizational Nature of Schools* (Allison, 1983). I regret to acknowledge that it attracted little scholarly attention, sinking with scarcely a ripple below the surface of the citation sea. Be that as it may, I take some small satisfaction from seeing the thrust and some of the substance of the arguments in that paper broadly reflected in subsequent literature. While it may well be wishful thinking or selective reading on my part, I think there is now a broader recognition of the organizational characteristics and conundrums that distinguish schools, and their administration, from other contemporary organizations, as well a greater willingness to acknowledge this distinctiveness through the simple, but semantically crucial, preference for referring to schools as schools, rather treating them as members of the implicitly hazy sub-set of educational organizations.

In this paper I want to pick-up some of the threads of argument and discussion from my earlier attempt with a view to taking stock of the current situation and sketching some promising ways forward. As in the earlier paper, this "Part 2" sequel will begin with a rehearsal of arguments for the sustained study of the organizational nature of schools and continue with a consideration of how this may be best accomplished. The chief argument here will be that the best way forward will continue to lie through a search for good theories. To address the questions begged by this bald and bold statement, I will attempt to outline what such theories would look like and what we might reasonably expect of them. The remainder of the paper will be devoted to sketching some potentially promising ways forward in seeking to better understand schools.

WHYS AND HOWS

Why study schools?

There are three reasonably straightforward reasons for us to want to study the organizational nature of schools, these being the arguments from professionalism, policy and academic curiosity. The professional argument rests on an obvious need for practitioners and professors of educational administration to know what can be

known about how schools are organized, how they work, the quality of life within them, and how such things can be improved. The argument from policy has a similar logic, but speaks to larger concerns. As has been brought home forcibly to politicians, pundits and the public at large in recent times, schools are important organs within the social and economic systems of modern states, and thus there is a need to better understand how they fit in and contribute to society and economy. This need is amplified by the lessons of the past several decades that suggest that there are limits to what can be accomplished through and by the direct manipulation of schools. Rather than serving as robust and responsive instruments of state policy, schools appear more akin to recalcitrant, refractory, regimes: sponges rather than scalpels in the process of social and economic reconstruction. A sustained attempt to better appreciate their organizational nature should help in clarifying the limits and possibilities of policy mandated attempts at change, both within and through schools.

A good starting point when considering academic reasons for studying schools is their ubiquity, both in the world and in the experience of its people. Today, virtually all of the world's children attend first level schools for at least a short time[1]; and for each child (or for that matter adult) in school there are family and friends who are vicariously involved in the experience. Given the diversity of religious organizations and their rites--from churches to temples to meeting houses--and the distance of governments and their bureaucracies from most people, then schools probably provide the commonest form of shared experience with formal organizations in the world today. This ubiquity makes schools makes prime candidates for scholarly inquiry: why should this form of organization be so dominant? In what ways and to what degree are schools and the lived experiences they provide similar and different in diverse cultures and societies?

Schools also appear to be very durable institutions, having been a feature of human society since at least Babylonian times, a fascinating point in itself. Nor are they likely to disappear in the foreseeable future. Smart pills, virtual reality simulations and other, as yet unanticipated innovations, may well be a part of our educational future, but schools will likely endure: they're just too useful, sensible, (and relatively cheap) for any modern society to do without. Rather than expecting smart pills and virtual reality to challenge or replace schools as viable agents of mass instruction, we

might more reasonably expect such innovations to be absorbed by schools where they can be "properly regulated", or to be marginalized as illegitimate.

But even if the importance of studying schools is readily accepted, why should we want to study their organizational nature, or, as it is more typically rendered in our literature, why should we want to study them as organizations? The standard answer builds on the widespread acceptance of formal organizations as a recognizable class of phenomena within the social world, phenomena which seem distinct from other social regularities such as primary groups, kinship structures, tribes, associations and nation states. This is so regardless of the ontological status we may ascribe to them: whether we view them as more or less concrete structural entities in society or as socially constructed and reconstructed arenas for the unfolding and contestation of truth and language games, we will all surely agree that schools exist in one way or another and that we are aware of their existence through our perceptions, shared or otherwise, of patterned regularities--instances of organization--in the social world as revealed by the language and actions of other people. Indeed, it would be impossible for us to debate their ontological status or how we may best know their nature if we did not implicitly agree that schools and other instances of social organization exist in some way.

The main argument proceeds by pointing to both the ubiquity and importance of formal organizations, such as factories, hospitals, broadcasting companies, schools and so forth, in contemporary society, noting that their importance flows not just from the great array of goods and services they provide, but also in the multiple ways in which they touch, condition and influence all our lives, from birth to death, as clients, customers, citizens and, of course, as employees or other formal members. An important corollary here is that formal organizations function, in part, through the imperative co-ordination of members and their activities, the main responsibility for which falls to specialized managerial or administrative staff. Hence any attempt to explain, understand, or improve the administrative process must necessarily take stock of the nature of organizations.

How else, then, would we seek to understand schools other than as formal organizations? Schools satisfy all the usual criteria for recognition as formal organizations: each has a unique identify, a membership roster, formal role differentiations, a distinct (although normally not completely inclusive) budget, an

say we should study them as organizations is thus something of a platitude. Furthermore, the literature of organizational theory offers both a launching pad and rich conceptual framework to guide such study. Yet a certain historical reluctance or hesitation to embrace this idea can be detected with the broader educational community. Part of this resistance, I think, stems from a deep-seated resistance among school people, especially teachers, to the increased legitimacy and power that is implicitly accorded to administrators when we think of schools as formal organizations. The sources of this resistance are complex, being rooted in historically shaped but hazily recognized class and status distinctions compounded by ideals of teacher autonomy. In the United States in particular, the managerial excesses and insensitivities associated with the scientific management movement (and some similar tensions associated with current attempts at school restructuring) provided fuel for such fears. A parallel point here is the current preference for preserving and idealizing the identity and sovereign autonomy of individuals over systems. This has become something of an article of faith in the socio-political ideologies of Western civilization, but has long been part of the rhetoric of school discourse: it also underpins radical postmodernist ideologies, a parallelism that probably helps explain the willingness of school people to embrace such views of the world. The point, nevertheless, is that ideologies which assume and celebrate the primacy of individuals tend to discourage or even deprecate analysis at the organizational level because this is seen as reducing or denying individual identity and agency.

These conjectures may find theoretical legitimation in the organizational distinctiveness of schools. As is now widely recognized in the literature and will be considered further below, schools exhibit a number of features that are not shared by business, commercial, and military organizations, a point which gains in significance when it is recognized that the great bulk of research and current theory in the broader literature was generated through the more or less exclusive study of these latter organizations. Thus, while schools are organizations, they may be sufficiently different from most other organizations as to warrant special study. This, I think, is the point which is meant to be conveyed when scholars in the field talk about developing a theory of schools as organizations. It is not just a matter of studying schools through more general theories of organizations, but of seeking specific theories which will

accommodate or account for those features which distinguish schools from other organizations. This is a truly exciting and important endeavour for it goes to the question of whether a general theory of organizations is possible, for such a theory must necessarily accommodate and account for significant observed realities of all organizations, including schools. If a general theory is not possible, then we may well have to settle for a number of specific or special theories, an outcome which would bear potentially profound ramifications for administrative practice and educational and social policy.

As signalled by the re-cycled title of this paper, I prefer to think about the problems in this endeavour in terms of reaching a better understanding of the organizational nature of schools, rather than as seeking a theory of schools as organizations. The key concerns will be centred on the manner and degree to which schools are similar to or different from other formal organizations: the central issue the degree to which observed and experienced realities of schools can or cannot be accommodated by a general theory of formal organization. If we think about our task in terms of seeking theories of "schools-as-organizations", we run the risk ending up with the cart before the horse on a number of conceptual levels. The schools-*as*-organizations construction, for instance, tends to encourage us to reason from extant theories of organizations to the reality of schools, an approach which may well result in significant aspects of the particular organizational nature of schools being overlooked. By focusing directly on the problems of identifying, describing and explaining the organizational nature of schools--what appear to be their distinctive characteristics, context and conditions--we should be better positioned to build more complete accounts and accurate theories of schools and their schoolness which can then be used to assess and appraise more general theories of social organization.

This does not mean that we should ignore extant theories of organizations. To the contrary, we obviously need to take stock of the images and information conveyed through the broader literature. But we need to do so judiciously, seeking to capitalize on promising conceptual frameworks and to identify potentially profitable points of dissonance to be probed in greater depth. How might we proceed?

On ways and means of inquiry

My preferred way forward has been sketched in general terms in the previous paragraphs. Simply put, we need look for, create, argue about, criticize, appraise, test, modify and reflect on specific theories about the organizational nature of schools and the ways in which they complement or clash with more general theories of organization and organizations.

The importance of trying to find good theories about the world is, I think, incontestable; where the trouble arises is over the questions of how we should go about it and what would qualify as a good theory. Until recently these questions have typically been discussed in our literature in terms of the polarized approaches to inquiry promoted during the so-called Griffiths-Greenfield debate (Dolmage, 1992). In my earlier paper I sought to stake-out an epistemological middle ground between Greenfield's advocacy of interpretative approaches and Griffiths' defence of theory movement science, a middle ground which would allow inquiry into the organizational nature of schools to capitalize on the strengths of both approaches. The passage of time has left me even more strongly convinced of the reasonableness of pursuing both interpretative and scientific lines of inquiry into the nature of schools and their administration and, indeed, of the ultimate complementarity of these approaches.

The situation today, however, appears far more complex and confused than it was ten or so years ago. Whereas Griffiths could sensibly observe in 1979 that the field was in a state of "intellectual turmoil", today we seem poised on the verge of intellectual chaos--or perhaps anarchy. Rather than the two main opposing arguments of earlier days, we are now faced with a seeming multitude of ideological, epistemological and ontological claims and preferences bearing such daunting labels as hermeneutical phenomenology, critical theory, feminism (radical and other kinds), ethnomethodology, neo-Marxism, interpretivism, relativism, naive and scientific realism, postpositivism, poststructuralism; I apologize for having missed someone's favourite!

At the root of this situation is the collapse of New or Theory Movement science. From the perspective of Greenfield and his supporters Griffithian science was, of course, defunct from the beginning of the debate. And although the balance of opinion now appears to have shifted decisively against the key preachings of theory-movement science (Culbertson, 1988; Griffiths, 1988; English 1994), we may expect that overly positivistic conceptions of science will continue to run around in the literature like

positivistic conceptions of science will continue to run around in the literature like headless chickens for some time to come. Even so, it is salutary to note influential authors such as Owens (1987) and Hoy and Miskel (1991 p. 2) distancing themselves from the more rigid prescriptions regarding theory and the nature of science that appeared in previous editions of their texts.

The failure of the unfortunately labelled theory movement does not mean the end of theory, and still less science. Halpin, Campbell, Getzels, Griffiths and the other theory movement reformers were quite correct in their belief that research and thinking about schools and their administration need to be guided and informed by good theories. Where they went wrong was in trying to reduce science and theory to an a priori prescriptive set of "logico-mathematical procedures"[2]. The most unfortunate consequence of this was the establishment of unrealistic and unattainable standards for what could qualify as theory in studying schools. The failure of that attempt allows us to remove theory from the positivistic pedestal on which the new movement sought to place it and to adopt more reasonable expectations. Rather than thinking of theory as a formula which reveals or points to ultimately true law-like generalizations about the world, I suggest we need to adopt a more fallibalist view wherein theories are understood as tentative attempts to account for and explain what we think we know about the world. Following Ellett (1994) Hooker (1987) Jarvie (1970) and Margolis (1987), such a view rejects the tenability of foundationalist epistemologies and is sceptical regarding the existence of universal truths, or at least humankind's ability to discover, or more accurately to recognize, such absolutes. At the core of this view is the belief that no matter how well a given theory appears to account for available data and explain the aspects of the world it addresses it is more than likely that there is more to be learnt, and that the theory will consequently need to be revised or replaced. Rather than searching for some ultimately correct theory, therefore, we must settle for theories that are just the best we have at the time.

This view carries with it an implicit acknowledgement that science is an innately and intimately social, and thus a value permeated and ultimately political endeavour, conditioned and constrained by language and existing theories. Despite the claims of some critics, this does not automatically invalidate the potential power of scientific inquiry into schools. At its heart, science is essentially a systematic attempt to test the

tenability--to estimate the truthfullness--of statements about the world with a view to creating and re-creating theories to account for what we think we know. Insofar as we can create that appear to be good theories about schools and their organizational nature--that is theories that seem to account for what we think we know about schools and how they are organized--then I think we have no choice but devise and apply solid and defensible ways of estimating the truth value of such statements. Ironically, perhaps, this will be much more difficult to accomplish than was envisaged in theory-movement science, and the results may often be less than clear-cut. But this is no excuse for not doing the best we can to try and improve the state of our knowledge. All we can sensibly do is recognize the difficulties involved and be as critical as we can about our efforts.

Central to the difficulties involved in social science is the problem of understanding. Throughout his debate with defenders of Griffithian science, Greenfield's major argument sought to drive a wedge between understanding and explanation. Science was portrayed as seeking objective explanations of the world. But this was deemed to be impossible in social contexts which demand subjective understandings of people, values and events. As Winch (1958) expressed the essence of this point, the object of interpretative inquiry becomes to grasp "the *point* or *meaning* of what is being done or said" (p. 47), a task which Greenfield deemed beyond the ken of uninvolved objective observers, and thus science. This distinction between understanding and explanation is by no means modern. In Dallmayr and McCarthy's (1977) words, "At the beginning [of the Renaissance], the two seedlings of early modernity--science and interpretative understanding--were able to coexist more or less peaceably and without mutual recriminations". Antagonism began to build during the Enlightenment when "logical calculation and empirical analysis began to gain ascendancy over and challenge the intrinsic value of cultural traditions" (p. 2);--and the logical positivists attempted to make this ascendancy complete with their recipe for a standard scientific method which sought to supplant all other paths to legitimate knowledge.

Greenfield and others who have followed his lead typically insist on equating science with the positivistic recipe or related versions of logical empiricism such as behaviourism, and fail to recognize either the less constrained scientific tradition which

this promise is a return to Dallmayr and McCarthy's peaceful coexistence between science and interpretative understanding, or, in a more optimistic view, a growing recognition of the mutual interdependence and complementarity of these two approaches to understanding the social world. Max Weber (1917/1978) was a strong and consistent advocate of the inescapable complementary of both approaches in any serious attempt at reaching an *"interpretative explanation"* of social phenomena. This in no way implies that Weber was in favour of the kind of science attacked by Greenfield. To the contrary, he explicitly rejected the possibility that social science "could spare the individual [administrator] the necessity of making [value] choice[s]" (p. 85). Yet he nonetheless maintained it was both possible and necessary for social science to engage in "empirical scientific work" (p. 88). He maintained that this can only be sensibly contemplated, however, through a "perpetual process of reconstruction of those concepts in terms of which we seek to lay hold of reality" (1949, p. 105). Here is where interpretative inquiry comes into its own, for without an historical understanding of society and the place of people, institutions, and organizations within the flow of human culture the potential power of social science is severely curtailed or denied.

My main point, then, is that both scientific explanation and interpretative understanding can and ultimately must inform each other in our search for an *interpretative explanation* of the organizational nature of schools. Each has its respective strengths and its proper domains; each can be seen as a potential source of good theories--tentatively plausible accounts--of the observed, experienced and historically evolving realities of schools; and each can, and ideally should, complement the other. This is not to suggest that we should try to meld the two approaches: the strength of each lies in its distinctly different approach to the world, and it is this that we want to capitalize on. Nor should we expect or urge scholars working within the two approaches to agree with each other, or for that matter for scholars working within the same approach to agree. As Jarvie (1970, p. 262) put it: "Agreement, in a strict or tight or wide or comprehensive sense is *never* reached: all we have is partial and temporary; tentative acceptance with the possibility of revision at any time." All I am suggesting is that we recognize this from the outset and use it as basis for discussion, argument, and

critical reflection about the substance, contradictions and complementary content of theories about the nature of schools, whatever their lineage.

Theories about the organizational nature of schools may thus take many forms and address different slices of observed, perceived, experienced and interpreted reality. They will always be tentative accounts, liable to be replaced or superceded when something better comes along; they will necessarily be conditioned by the language, culture and politics of those that form and hold them. Good theories will be those that best account for what we think we know given a reasoned appraisal of the relevant evidence, and we may well have two or more good theories about similar aspects of the world at any time. Most important of all, good theories will always be open to questioning, criticism and argument; any account of the world or of schools that precludes questioning and argument about its tenability cannot be accepted as good theory. To salvage a quotation from Popper (1975) used in my earlier paper, "what counts in the long run is a good argument, a valid argument, and what it establishes or refutes" (p. 239).

For these and other reasons I suspect that the proliferating postmodernist doctrines that are seeking converts in our field will probably not produce much in the way of good theories about the organizational nature of schools (Maxcy, 1994; Miron, 1991; Scheurich, 1994). By overgeneralizing and overextending (in my view) the implications that follow from the failure of the Enlightenment project, radical postmodernists tend to conclude that, because (in their view) knowledge is constructed and legitimated through the exercise of social power, scholars cannot hold themselves aloof from the political "struggle" to determine which "truths" will prevail. From here it is but a small step to the view that research and theory can and should be co-opted to promote whatever values one believes to be right and best. Most postmodernist writers use this license to promote the (currently) uncontested values championed during the Enlightenment, such as democracy, rationality and humanism. Thus can Miron (1991) readily claim that the purpose of school leadership is to transform schools, where transformation is defined as meaning (with reference to Cherryholmes (1988)) "the reduction, and eventual elimination, of academic, social, political and economic inequalities currently experienced by disadvantaged groups as a result of discursive practices within the school organization" (p. 1-2). Entirely oblivious, it seems, of the

that the simple declaration of these ideals constitutes sufficient reason for others to accept both the political agenda being advanced and the underlying assumptions about the nature of schools and society. This flies in the face of reasoned arguments for an interpretative understanding of the historical reality of schools as cultural; it is also contrary to the precepts of science advanced which requires an appraisal of the tenability of the causal claim being made, as well as a coherent and plausible account (theory) of how school leaders might reasonably be expected to bring about such a transformation.

Radical postmodernists are able to elide such crucial matters because the appropriate answers are already built-in to the meta-theory at the centre of their doctrine, thus vitiating the prospect of constructive theory building and denying fallibalist principles. But while I think these doctrines will turn out to be intellectually sterile, I would not wish to urge an embargo on radical postmodernist approaches, or any other approaches which attract the interest and commitment of colleagues. Within broadly agreed ethical limits, scholars who find themselves attracted or committed to a particular view of the world must be free to pursue the lines of inquiry appropriate to that view and we would be foolish to want to prohibit any ethically acceptable mode of inquiry for we cannot know in advance which will eventually yield convincing arguments. All that can reasonably be expected given the current intellectual turmoil in our field is that students and scholars should choose what, on the evidence available and their interpretation of this, looks like a promising way forward.

SOME POSSIBLE WAYS FORWARD

What are some of the ways in which we can progress toward improved understandings about the organizational nature of schools? In this final section I want to sketch four types of answers to this question. I will begin with a brief consideration with some interesting lines of inquiry suited to interpretative work, then move to a brief overview of how we might make progress in probing the important question of differences between schools and other organizations. The final two sections will offer comments on specific aspects of the organizational nature of schools, namely: loose coupling and the related topic of organizational technology.

Some interpretative lines of inquiry.

In my earlier paper I urged that we should not ignore the wider literature in our quest to better understand schools.

> Philosophers, anthropologists, historians, and sociologists have all considered the nature of schools; their images, metaphors, and analogies demand our attention. Neither should the fictional literature be ignored. Dickens, for example, had much to say about schools. (Allison, 1984, p. 19)

More sustained arguments by Greenfield, Hodgkinson and others have encouraged movement toward greater use of philosophy, literature and humanities, but as yet there has been little serious work of this kind in our field. Fenwick English's (1994) stimulating treatment of *Theory in Educational Administration* pushes us further in this direction while providing some tantalizing illustrations of the benefits that stand to be reaped through serious study of biography and the humanities. In addition to providing a sensible discussion of theory, English shows how historical and literary works, from accounts of the Trojan wars, through *King Lear*, to the life and accomplishments of Horace Mann offer rich interpretative understandings of the meaning of leadership. In the case of Mann and other educational administrators, their leadership experiences speak directly to issues associated with the organizational nature of schools and are thus directly relevant to our concerns. But even when this is not the case, historical and literary accounts of leaders inevitably bring us into contact with the organizations they create, destroy, manipulate or confront, and thus provide opportunities to better understand the nature of organizations and the experience of being organized, knowledge that in turn can be used in the comparative study of schools and their leadership. English is a particularly strong advocate of biography, arguing that "there should come a time" when well-constructed biographies of school leaders will be readily acceptable as doctoral dissertations in educational administration[3] (p. 232), a view with which I warmly concur.

What other kinds of research might we envisage which would draw on the humanities or the broader social science literature in attempts to better understand the organizational nature of schools? Comparative and/or analytical studies of great (e.g.

Sturm's original Gymnasium) and/or insignificant (e.g. Dotheboys Hall) could be useful starting points, as could analytical and comparative studies of past and present textbooks on school management and organization (English [1994, pp. 103-110] offers some good leads here). Then there is the rich literature (and other media), biographical, anecdotal and fictional, dealing with experiences of schooling from the multiple perspectives of students, teachers, managers, parents and observers, all of which awaits more thorough investigation, analysis and interpretation. There are also substantial archival resources relating to school establishment, organization and administration awaiting serious attention: what, for example, might the archives of long established cities such as New York, Toronto, Madrid or even Cleveland tell us about relatively invariant and more volatile views and principles relating to the organization and operation of schools; and what about the archives of long enduring organizations with strong educational interests, such as the Roman Catholic Church, and more specifically the Society of Jesus? And how about the scrupulously preserved records of debates in public legislatures? Or the newsworthy stories about scandals and crises in school management and governance preserved in the miles of microfilm archived over the past century or so?

Then there are more specialized bodies of academic literature which have addressed, directly or in passing, cross-cultural or cross-temporal instances of schooling, schools and their organization. Aries' (1963) *Centuries of Childhood* springs to mind as one instance, as does Mayer's (1963) chronicle of more contemporary variety and consistency in schooling. Such works, and the sources on which they draw, offer rich pastures in which students of the organizational nature of schools may browse and inquire. Then there are the more sharply focused studies of the development, creation and variety of schools and their culturally and historically determined organization provided by sociologists such as Archer (1979) and historians such as Gidney and Millar (1990) and Tyack and his associates (e.g. Tyack, 1974; Tyack, Lowe & Hansot, 1984), all of which provide potentially rich points of departure in probing commonalities and contrasts in the manner in which schools are and have been organized and operated. These instances by no means exhaust the available possibilities, and could be considered quite pedestrian when juxtaposed against projects such as the thematic analysis of schools and schooling as presented in art or

science fiction, both of which I would want to argue offer the prospect of useful insights into schools, and the possibility of assisting in the development of good theories about their organizational nature.

In addition to such essentially historical and biographical lines of inquiry there is a continuing need for interpretative and reflective case studies of school life. This is by no means a neglected line of inquiry and we are blessed with a range of existing studies of this kind, from Waller's (1932/1961) early reflections to the contemporary studies of Cusick (e.g. 1973 & 1987) and others. Even so, we need a continuing flow of such studies if we are to best capture and benefit from the theory informing power of this form of inquiry, with successive studies building on, integrating, and challenging previous insights. To better advance our particular interests in probing the organizational nature of schools there is also a need for observational and case studies which centre on theoretically strategic aspects and elements of schools. The enduring problems of order and authority are one such area, as are the perennial problems of change, the process of curriculum construction and forms of ceremony and ritual. One potentially rich approach here would be to document and seek interpretative accounts of administrative and organizational failures. In addition to their potential heuristic value to the profession, gaining a clearer understanding of how plans, people and their aspirations go awry--or are perceived to do so from different perspectives--should assist in casting features associated with success (whether understood in terms of transformation or maintaining stability) into sharper relief.

Comparative analysis

As argued earlier, one of the key reasons for wanting to study the organizational nature of schools is that they may turn out to be sufficiently different from other organizations as to warrant special theoretical treatment. Interpretative studies of the kind sketched above will provide rich descriptive and theoretical accounts which will help in identifying commonalities across schools, isolating points of potential difference, and generally assessing the theoretical implications. Studies which seek to directly compare life within schools and other organizations will also be of obvious value here. The current literature points to some of the specific organizational contrasts which need

attention, either through interpretative inquiry, through retrospective analyses of the results of such work, or other forms of inquiry.

The characteristics of schools which are most frequently cited as differentiating them from other organizations are the presence of problematical and ambiguous goals, an indeterminate core technology, a reliance on professional or semi-professional staff with the concomitant autonomy this bestows, and fluid participation, with members entering and leaving rapidly and unpredictably (e.g. Murphy & Hallinger, 1984; Gamoran & Dreeben, 1986). As noted in my earlier paper, however, these features are among those used by Hasenfeld and English (1974) to designate the entire class of human service organizations [HSOs], which includes hospitals, prisons, welfare agencies, police departments and other organizations as well as schools. Hasenfeld and English even go one step further than much of the literature by identifying three other features shared by HSOs, namely: their core activities depend on staff-client interaction, they lack reliable and valid measures of effectiveness, and the "raw materials" processed by HSOs are human beings.

Schools would appear to exhibit the full set of HSO characteristics, but this does not help with the broader theoretical question, for by definition they share these characteristics with other HSOs. This is, nonetheless, a step forward for there is much to be gained from studying and theorizing about the nature, variety and meaning of these shared characteristics and the implications they bear for organizational theory and administrative practice. It is also salutary to note that HSOs appear to increase in number, size, variety and importance as societies move through the developmental continuum from pre- to post industrialism. Indeed, given the current size and the projected growth of the human service sector in so-called advanced societies, organizational theorists might be well advised to shift at least some of their attention from the business, commercial and military organizations which have long been the main focus of interest to facilitate more sustained study of HSOs.

As well as seeking to better understand how schools are similar to and different from banks, factories and gypsum mines, therefore, we also need to pay specific attention to similarities and differences between schools and different kinds of HSOs. Many of the questions we will want to ask will require the sensible use of the scientific approach. Just how problematical and ambiguous are the goals of schools, hospitals,

welfare agencies, banks or gypsum mines? And just how fluid is member participation in such organizations? And what are the ratios of professional, semi-professional and other employees across an appropriate spectrum of organizations? There are obviously problems to be overcome in clarifying the central concepts in these and similar questions and in developing or finding appropriate measures or other pertinent data sources, but these are not insuperable impediments. Providing we remain aware of and critical about the limitations of whatever data we choose to collect in investigating such questions, sensible analysis of such data can obviously move us forward.

In designing studies of this kind--and indeed in all of our work into the organizational nature of schools--we need to be clear about what we mean by the term, and thus what actual organizations will qualify for study as schools. The problem here is that many of purportedly distinctive features of schools are shared, although in some cases somewhat fuzzily, with a potentially very broad and otherwise diverse set of social phenomena, ranging from universities, through military boot camps, to girl-scout troops. Because of this I suggest that we explicitly delimit the term "school" to mean only child and youth enrolling organizations directly or indirectly regulated by state legislation which imposes compulsory educational obligations on residents within a defined age group, and provides formally free access to schools as a means of satisfying those obligations. Expressed more directly, this would restrict attention to schools within what is commonly recognized as the K-12 grade range in North America, and what are known as the primary and secondary levels or cycles more globally. In the North American and European contexts, this delimitation tends to focus attention on publicly funded and governed schools, but private schools in the K-12 spectrum are not excluded as they are also typically regulated, either directly or indirectly, by state authorities, and they normally provide an accepted way for parents and children to satisfy legislated educational obligations. This delimitation conforms to common practice in the literature, although it is not always explicitly stated. It is nonetheless important to be clear about the empirical limits of the subject of discussion, first to avoid confusion with other organizations which are designated as schools, such as schools of engineering or business at the tertiary level, and second to throw key distinguishing characteristics into sharper relief.

Adopting an explicit delimitation such as that suggested here raises questions about the analytical status of administrative superstructures at district (or regional), state (provincial), and national levels. The organization and effects of administrative and governance external to schools themselves can obviously not be ignored, but, as will be pursued in a little more detail below, we have observational, research and theoretical grounds for thinking that such superstructures have more tenuous links to and control over schools than is often assumed. This suggests that while we need to pay attention to organizational superstructures, it is schools themselves that are the key analytical units. This view appears to be supported by both the variety and vulnerability of external administrative and governance structures. As demonstrated by recent policy shifts in New Zealand, the United Kingdom and some North American jurisdictions, the alignment and functions of superordinate administrative systems can be rapidly restructured. But schools, the fundamental functional units, seem to endure relatively unchanged. This is not, of course, to deny that individual schools can also be closed (or opened) on short notice: the point is that schools seem far more durable than their administrative superstructures, school survival being primarily dependent on demographic factors, rather than political fashions. Barring social or economic collapse, the imperative need to provide education and custodial care for the young citizens of contemporary states ensures the continued existence of schools, but carries no warrant for the durability of superordinate administrative structures, which can be dismantled or restructured at will.

Loose coupling.

When considering how schools[4] are distinguished from other organizations reference is often made to an inherent structural looseness that makes administrative control problematic (Bidwell, 1965). Current interest in this line of inquiry was promoted by Weick's (1976) seminal conceptual analysis of educational organizations as loosely coupled systems and recently reviewed and critically elaborated by Orton & Weick (1990). But once again, it turns out that loose coupling is by no means unique to or distinctive of schools, especially when delimited to child-enrolling schools as suggested above. As indicated by the title of Weick's influential article and foreshadowed in Cohen March and Olsen's (1972) treatment of organized anarchy and

of educational organizations in general, particularly universities, rather than just child-enrolling schools. More to the point, the loose coupling property has been applied to a wide range of decidedly non-school-like or non-HSO organizations, ranging from sports teams (Keidel, 1984), to steel works (Hedberg, 1984) and space stations (Schoonhoven, 1986).

Diffusion of the loose coupling construct across the broader field of organizational studies weakens its value as a distinctive and distinguishing characteristic of schools, but strengthens its theoretical and analytical power. Indeed, Orton and Weick (1991) argue that using the construct to simply categorize organizations or sub-systems and elements as being more or less loosely or tightly coupled misses the theoretical point and, in effect, trivializes analysis. The power of the loose coupling image, they argue, resides in a dialectical interpretation which allows for a simultaneous contemplation of apparently contradictory logical imperatives in theories of organization, such as rationality and indeterminacy, connection and autonomy, responsiveness and distinctiveness. Concentrating on dialectical interpretations will, in their view, foster richer conceptions of organizations and direct attention to the description and analysis of dynamic processes. This is a powerful insight which needs to be exploited in future work.

Technology

The dialectic interpretation of the loose coupling concept could be of great help in seeking to better understand the technology of schools and schooling, an aspect of the organizational nature of schools that has been seriously neglected. The term technology is being used here, of course, in its organizational theory sense to denote the characteristic way in which work is done and value added in organizations. As pointed out by Orton and Weick (1990, p. 204) the notion of loose coupling traces its intellectual heritage to Thompson's (1967) theory of technical rationality in which the technical core of organizations is seen as being sealed off from environmental influences (proposition 2.1, p. 19) so as to increase determinacy, while the managerial and institutional level are characterized by increasing openness and flexibility in order respond to uncertainties in the task environment. This theory helps account for Parson's (1960) original observation regarding the existence of qualitative breaks in

authority at the articulation points between technical, managerial and institutional sub-systems, and foreshadows the loose coupling dialectic.

How do these and related theories apply to schools? How might we extend or adapt this framework to better account for their organizational nature? Within school as delimited and defined above the core technology would obviously appear to be located in classrooms. What are the mechanisms and means by which classroom instruction is sealed off from environmental uncertainties, and what are the experienced meanings associated with this process? And how are uncertainty and indeterminacy reduced and controlled in classrooms and through the process of classroom teaching? To make progress with these and related questions I suspect we will need seek or build more complete and insightful conceptual models of classroom instruction than those currently available in our literature.

One of the conceptual problems that will need to be resolved in attempting this is what I termed in the earlier paper the uncertain organizational status of pupils. As implied in the Hasenfeld and English account of Human Service Organizations and reflected broadly in the literature, organizational analysis encourages us to view pupils as "raw materials" processed by the organization. Such a view may be theoretically useful when analyzing some aspects of the socialization technology of schools as this operates through impersonal conventions, rules, rites and disciplinary procedures, but it seems less appropriate with regard to the problems and process of instructional technology which would appear to demand a greater recognition of individual identity and participation. The only other sensible way to view pupils is to treat them as organizational members, but this then raises the question of their status and function role: should we view them as clients, "inmates", partners or what?

Drawing on an earlier attempt at resolving this problem (Allison, 1980), I suggest there is much to be gained by granting pupils a similar organizational membership status to that held by workers in other formal organizations. This carries with it some potentially profound implications, one of the most important being that it elevates teachers from the position of worker to an organizational status akin to that of first line supervisors such as, forepersons, office managers or team leaders. It also suggests a theory of the core technology of classroom instruction in which knowledge becomes the raw material worked on by the pupils under the direction and supervision of teachers.

Not only does such a view provide the basis for a sensible account of how the instructional function of schools is accomplished it has the added advantage of reflecting conventional discourse about the nature of the work which pupils do and are expected to do in schools. The pupils' task of learning prescribed knowledge and skill is ultimately accomplished individually, but various forms of group or class activities are typically used to reduce uncertainty regarding what is to be learnt and to establish appropriate indicators of success. The expertise of teachers in selecting, "batching", presenting, sequencing and reinforcing learning tasks also appears as a important variable.

Christopher Hurn's (1985) discussion of schools as work organizations offers some intriguing extensions and corollaries to this view (see also Corwin and Borman, 1988). He notes, for example, that grades awarded to students have a functional equivalency to wages--currency which is exchangeable for parental and peer approval, and more significantly for potential entry to further education or employment (p. 254). He also notes that "...many students probably find at least part of their school work to be as hard, arduous, and monotonous as adults find work in most offices and factories" (Hurn, p. 255). But there are also interesting differences:

> school work is the process of continued acquisition of new skills rather than the constant repetition of skills that have been learned thoroughly and completely. Adult work, although with obvious exceptions, tends to be less demanding in this respect. Secretaries, salespeople, and physicians may learn new skills on the job, but most of their work consists of applying knowledge and techniques that were acquired years ago to predominantly routine tasks. (p. 255)

So too, it would appear, with teachers, which makes for another interesting loose coupling dialectic between repetitious regularity for teachers and challenging progression for students. A final comment from Hurn points to a potential topic for empirical investigation: "if we constructed an hypothetical index of the frequency with which workers can receive commands, school work would rank close to the top,..(p. 256). Intuitively we would also expect to find a negative correlation between such an index and grade level, and possibly a positive relationship between the socio-economic status of students, or possibly the efficacy of school organization or ethos.

Building and refining theories about the technology of classroom teaching is crucial in our quest to better understand the organizational nature of schools, but as

hinted above we may also need to consider whether or not schools embody a parallel technology related their socialization function. The problem of maintaining order is common to all organizations, but looms particularly large in schools where, as in prisons, it serves formative as well as functional ends. In attempting to discharge their mandate of instilling approved social behaviours, attitudes, and values in their pupils, schools must typically establish and police school-wide as well as classroom specific standards and expectations, and this can easily create another source of dialectical tension. The ways in which schools characteristically go about this task is another area that might be usefully probed through technology theories.

The situation becomes even more complex when we move to the managerial and institutional levels, for there are reasons to think that additional upwardly nested technologies are present in state regulated schooling systems. It is typically the case that the officially prescribed curriculum in modern states extends across several distinct types of schools and provides sequential, hierarchically branching paths along which potential graduates can pass. In the North American type case, for example, pupils will normally pass through elementary, junior high and senior high schools with various forms of curricular specialization being evident at the high school level and perhaps earlier. Within this broader system individual schools become sub-assemblies through which the flow of pupils must be monitored, co-ordinated and controlled, processes which would appear to be embedded in a long-linked technology dispersed across school districts and co-ordinated by state-level organs. Specific decisions regarding the placement, routing, and progress of individual students through the official curriculum may typically be made within schools, but they will normally be made within the rules and options prescribed by the official curriculum and accompanying regulations, which may, for example, establish expectations for the accommodation of exceptional children or prescribe formal progression requirements of various kinds. In the theory being advanced here, the official curriculum and its accompanying rules constitutes a technology of state schooling, the technical core of the system being located in district and state agencies, the workers being the educational administrators who apply, interpret, monitor, and enforce the relevant rules.

This view readily accommodates Meyer and Rowans' (1978)[5] discussion of logic-of-confidence and ritual classification mechanisms in modern state schooling

systems. The Meyer and Rowan formulation explains the observed lack of effective control by district and state bureaucracies over the everyday operation of schools by positing an imperative need for (US) schools and school systems to maintain public confidence in the system of ritual classification which justifies the continued existence of schools in their current form and legitimates the sorting and credentialing of graduates, and thus their life chances. "By decoupling formal structures from activities", they argue, "uncertainty about the effectiveness of the ritual categories is reduced" (p. 89). If the process of ritual classification is treated as the central technical function of regional and state level administrative organs--the long-linked technology that constitutes the technical core for the administration of public schooling--then we can both reduce the emphasis given to myth and ritual in the Meyer and Rowan account and entertain potentially stronger theories about the apparent absence of effective control over schools, and especially the technology of classroom teaching. Under Thompson's theory of technical rationality the process of ritual classification can be treated as a rational response by state and local administrative agencies to pressures for the development of improved curriculum and operational rules, with the need to reduce uncertainty in the application of these rules leading to a logical preoccupation with their administration and the development of mechanisms which seal them off from environmental disturbances. Under such circumstances, the possibility of responsive links between formally superordinate administrative agencies and the process of classroom instruction becomes even more remote than envisaged by Meyer and Rowan. Not only does the technical core of schools seal off teachers and pupils from environmental disturbances in the task environment of schools, operations in the technical core of district offices serve to seal off administrators from disturbances in their task environment, including those which may emanate from schools and classrooms. Rather than viewing schools and their constituent classrooms as formally subordinated units integrated into the organizational hierarchy of school districts, therefore, this dual technology view suggests they might be better viewed as potential sources of disruption within the task environments of district and state administrative agencies.

CONCLUSION

I ended my earlier paper on this topic with a quote from Thom Greenfield. This time around I will draw from what ten years ago would have been seen as the opposite camp. In 1958 Andrew Halpin's introductory chapter to *Administrative Theory in Education* opened with the following sentence: "Our purpose is to communicate with each other in an endeavor to develop useful theory in educational administration" (p. 1). For the purposes of this symposium we can add ... "through a sustained attempt to develop an interpretative explanation of schools". Providing we do not lose sight of the ultimate interdependence of cultural interpretation and scientific explanation, and providing we recognize the inherent fallibility of our best theories, then Halpin's words can continue to guide our efforts.

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Notes

[1] It is impossible to obtain precise figure given the current state of data collection and variations in access provisions. UNESCO (1991) reports a 99% world gross enrolment rate in first level education, but acknowledges that "it is still the case in some regions that a substantial number of children never get to school at all (p. 31). Still, it would not be unreasonable to expect that around 90% of the world's children attend some kind of first level school for at least a short time.

[2] The quote is from Feigl's definition of theory which was praised as an exemplar in Halpin's (1954, p. 7) influential book *Administrative Theory in Education*. For the record, Fiegl defined theory as "a set of assumptions from which can be derived by purely logico-mathematical procedures, a larger set of empirical laws".

[3] Good analytical biographies of significant school leaders would presumably be quite acceptable in graduate programs in history, and we could imagine that an analysis of educational imagery in Shakespeare, or schools and schooling in Dickens, would be acceptable in English departments, with the usual proviso, that is, that a willing supervisor was available. And there's the rub, for while the disciplines of History or English Literature might be reasonably expected to accommodate such work, it is far less reasonable to imagine that faculty in the field of educational administration would normally have the disciplinary training to provide competent supervision for studies of this kind. In encouraging such work, therefore, we must recognize the associated obligation to build bridges to and be able to recruit competent disciplinary help from other departments. There is also the option of recruiting or cross-appointing one or more historians, philosophers, linguists and so forth who have an interest in schools and their administration into departments of educational administration, a move which I warmly encourage on the basis of my experiences in a multi-disciplinary department. Even so, we will never be able to cover all logical disciplinary angles and retain a competent core of traditional expertise, and thus greater cross-department co-operation seems unavoidable (as well as long overdue?).

[4] Or more accurately school systems as constituted at the district or regional level, for the full theory requires the inclusion of the Parsonian managerial and institutional levels of organization.

[5] I share Perrow's (1986, p. 271) view to the effect that their 1987 article is to be preferred over the 1977 extension of the main insights.